

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Gloucestershire		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 32		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Ray & Liz: Lived Experience Transformed into International Feature Film For Multiple Platforms		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2016-2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Richard Billingham	Professor of Fine Art	1/9/2005 to date
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2018 onwards		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p><i>Ray &amp; Liz</i> is an award-winning and critically acclaimed feature film written and directed by photographer, artist and film maker, Professor Richard Billingham. Billingham's debut feature film was released in August 2018 and distributed globally across multiple platforms including cinemas and Amazon Prime. <i>Ray &amp; Liz</i> made a significant contribution to UK cultural life as a critically acclaimed contribution to British social realist cinema, which received 15 international film awards. The film received further recognition for its depiction of marginalised realities, through specialist awards for socially engaged film making and general media coverage of the issues it raised. The project also extended the reach of Billingham's ground-breaking body of family artwork (usually shown in gallery settings) to a new, and much wider, global audience.</p>		
<b>1. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p><i>Ray &amp; Liz (R1)</i> is an independent feature film, written and directed by Professor Richard Billingham, and released in August 2018 to international critical acclaim. It was the latest in a long series of photographic, video and film works based on Billingham's own family history. However, <i>Ray &amp; Liz</i> represented an ambitious new development in its use of actors to recreate an autobiographical narrative from lived experience, within the context of a full-length feature film for general theatrical release.</p> <p>Billingham joined the University of Gloucestershire in 2005. Since then, he has continued to research and develop the autobiographical work, which began in the 1990s with <i>Ray's A Laugh</i>. The research phase for <i>Ray &amp; Liz</i> started in 2014 and was supported by a 2016 Leverhulme Fellowship (<b>G3</b>). Billingham's 2015 gallery installation, <i>Ray, (R2)</i> also served as a pilot for the full-length film and became one of three autobiographical vignettes that make up <i>Ray &amp; Liz</i>.</p> <p>The research for this project had three main objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To rearticulate a documentary-based body of autobiographical artwork into a fictionalised cinematic narrative</li> <li>• To work with an extended team of actors and technical experts to evoke the authenticity of an original personal lived experience</li> <li>• To visualise marginalised realities within their historic and cultural context through the medium of a general release feature film</li> </ul>		

In *Ray*, (R2) Billingham made an initial exploration of the potential of some predominant technologies from the 1970s and 80s, including 16mm film. This analogue format also offers a 3:4 aspect ratio that suited *Ray*'s roots in documentary photography, as well as the distinctive physical textures (e.g. wood, paper and fabric) of the period. He extended this approach with *Ray & Liz* and further reinforced the film's political, cultural and historical context through visual imagery and sound design, rather than through dialogue or voice over. Authentic recreations of costume, hair and make-up, regional dialogue, as well as a soundtrack from the same era and ambient sound design, further contributed to the film's ability to convey the period tacitly.

Billingham also drew on earlier video research conducted in zoos across the world, and exhibited in 2006 (R3), to create a similar sense of psychological and physical confinement in the two films. The UK DVD and BluRay of *Ray & Liz* includes a special feature on Billingham's work in zoos and how this relates to the film itself (R4).

In terms of working with actors, during the script-writing process for *Ray & Liz* Billingham returned to a collection of 20 or so audio tapes he made as a boy. These contained recordings that he made of friends and family during the 1980s. The tapes served as a rich set of 'memory aids', helped with writing authentic dialogue and, when played to the actors, enabled them to 'step in the shoes' of Billingham's family members. Billingham also interviewed his brother and wrote extensive 'character backstories' for each actor to help them authentically recreate family members.

The French DVD release includes a 30-minute interview with Dr Marion Duquerroy of Université Paris 1 - Panthéon-Sorbonne, which covers the film's realist depiction of poverty and contextualises *Ray & Liz* within Billingham's creative practice as a whole (R5). A monograph by Dr Kieran Cashell of the Limerick Institute of Technology was published by Bloomsbury in 2020, titled *Photographic Realism: the art of Richard Billingham*. Chapter 6 deals with the contribution of *Ray* and *Ray & Liz* in detail (R6).

*Ray & Liz* was produced with a budget of £700,000 from the BFI Film Fund and Ffilm Cymru Wales with Big Lottery Money as well as funds from a kickstarter campaign.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

**R1** *Ray & Liz*, 2018 (theatrical release) Richard Billingham: UK, Luxbox  
<http://www.luxboxfilms.com/ray-and-liz/>

**R2** *Ray*, 2015 (gallery installation) Richard Billingham: UK <http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/4174/>

**R3** Richard Billingham, *Zoo* (2006) [richard-billingham-zoo.pdf](http://richard-billingham-zoo.pdf) (blogs.com)

**R4** *Ray & Liz*, 2019 (DVD) Richard Billingham: UK, New Wave Films (including Zoo feature)

**R5** *Ray & Liz*, 2019 (DVD) Richard Billingham: UK, Potemkine Films (French DVD including interview with Dr Marion Duquerroy)

**R6** Cashell, Kieran. *Photographic Realism: The Art of Richard Billingham*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

### Grants and Awards

**G1** *Ray* was produced in 2014 with funding from Arts Council Wales, (£25,000) Arts Council England (£15,000) and Fidlab Marseille (€10,000).

**G2** *Ray & Liz* was funded with a budget of £860,000 including grants from the BFI Film Fund, Ffilm Cymru Wales and the Big Lottery.

**G3** Research for *Ray & Liz* was enabled by a £23,558 Leverhulme Fellowship (grant reference number - RF-2016-579).

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

*Ray & Liz* is an award-winning and critically acclaimed debut feature film by Professor Richard Billingham, which was released internationally in 2018. *Ray & Liz* also received widespread praise for its contribution to British cinema and the social realist genre of film making. This film brought Billingham's ground-breaking autobiographical works of art, previously shown in gallery settings, to a wide and international new audience of film fans and cinema goers. As such, *Ray & Liz* made a significant contribution to cultural life in the UK. The film also received recognition from influential and diverse sources for its depiction of poverty and alcoholism. These included the European Commission, international film festivals, global national media outlets and leading medical journal, *Lancet Psychiatry*.

##### Audience Interest and Reach

*Ray & Liz* was released in August 2018 and screened at 53 high profile international film festivals until October 2019 - including the *BFI London Film Festival* (2018), the *Toronto International Film Festival* (2018), and the 56<sup>th</sup> *New York Film Festival* (a). The film received a further worldwide theatrical release including: the UK and Ireland (New Wave); China (Hugo East); France (Potemkine); Spain (Noucinemart); the US (Kimstim); Belgium (Filmfreak), and Taiwan (Cineplex). This was followed by international TV, DVD and online distribution across multiple platforms including *Sky*, *BFI*, *Curzon Home Cinema*, *i-Tunes*, *Virgin* and *Amazon Prime*.

As part of the international programme of festivals, Billingham and the film's producer engaged directly with cinema goers through 'question and answer' sessions at 28 film festivals (two to three events per festival). These included Ficinam (Mexico), Jeonju (South Korea) and Sevilla Festival (Spain) (c). Audience questions in the Q & A sessions, along with private emails to Billingham from members of the public who had watched the film, demonstrated the personal resonance of *Ray & Liz* held for viewers in its authentic depiction of austerity measures, alcohol abuse and childhood neglect (also see e).

##### Awards and Critical Reception

*Ray & Liz* received 15 international film awards plus a further 23 nominations, including two *British Independent Film Awards* in 2018, as well as a *BAFTA* nomination in 2019 for 'best debut feature' (b). It also attracted international critical acclaim, which praised both its artistic contribution to British cinema and presentation of a marginalized social group.

Upon its official UK cinema release in March 2019, Sight & Sound contextualised *Ray & Liz* within the tradition of British social realist cinema, alongside established film directors such as Ken Loach, Terence Davies and Alan Clarke (d).

In the UK, *The Telegraph* described *Ray & Liz* as a 'darkly funny portrait of a Britain that shouldn't exist'. *The Guardian* hailed it as an 'extraordinary family album brought to life'. *The Times* wrote: 'the authenticity is bracing, the framing and lighting as striking as you'd expect from a photographer'. *The Independent* praised it as 'unexpectedly moving and touched by grace'. (d)

Across Europe, critics gave a similar response. In a five-star review, *The Irish Times* wrote that it was a 'gruelling uncompromising and beautiful movie'. *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* in France rated it film of the month, saying: *Ray & Liz* is 'a haunting piece [...] that conceals the secrets of a solitary childhood'" *Télérama* hailed it as 'gorgeous and melancholic'. (d)

Following the US release, *Variety* described the film as 'a rare and remarkable cine-memoir ... a uniquely moving work of self-identification and self-illustration, bristling with pride, anger and even some regret — for the general ugly state of things, certainly, but perhaps for a family he's come to see, and shoot, a little differently over the decades.' (d)

### **Marginalised realities: informing debates on poverty and social justice**

The social themes of *Ray & Liz* also led to international recognition of the contribution that a mainstream release feature film can make to debates on poverty and social justice (e), as follows:

- *Lux Film Prize* shortlist (2019.) This prize is awarded by Members of the European Parliament to films that tackle topical social, political, economic and environmental issues, as well as encouraging debate about values and social issues across Europe.
- *SIGNIS Award at the Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema (2019).* **SIGNIS is a non-governmental organization aimed at promoting just and truthful portrayals of different groups in society and promoting human dignity, justice and reconciliation**
- *Best Film at The Subversive Film Festival, Croatia (2019).* The festival jury found it worthy of the award because it is – "...a film which is deeply compassionate, humane and pensive. By exposing the destiny of a single working-class family, Billingham's film demonstrates, the devastating impact of the neoliberal economic revolution started by British prime-minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s which remains highly influential until today."

*Lancet Psychiatry* is a monthly journal for clinicians featuring research, expert review, and provocative comment and opinion in mental health. In 2016, a preview of *Ray & Liz* by Erica Crompton praised the film's humane depiction of isolation, alcoholism and poverty.

'Richard Billingham's *Ray & Liz* is the most self-reflective of films, putting a compassionate spin on his own father, Ray, who lives a life of isolation and alcoholism in a Birmingham tower block. The film continues the storytelling of Billingham's 2001 photographic account of his father collected in the book *Ray's a Laugh*...the film allows insight into the artist's upbringing and of the life of Ray, a man with an alcohol problem. It does so with such loving care—such as a bedroom scene with the hearty, warm glow of the fire—it can be seen as spiritual.' (f)

As an article in *The Guardian* (*Reality bites: does Ray & Liz avoid the poverty porn trap? 4/3/2019*) also argued:

'This is what makes a film such as Richard Billingham's *Ray & Liz* so exceptional. It is unashamedly a portrait of white, West Midlands poverty in the Thatcher-era and, on paper, ticks many of those poverty-porn boxes: drinking, smoking, obesity, neglect, tattoos, council-estate squalor...But *Ray & Liz* is no gratuitous wallow; it is authentic, sympathetic, lyrical, keenly observant and richly detailed....Ray and Liz were Billingham's real-life parents, whom he has documented in various forms over the past 20 years....and *Ray & Liz* is effectively a moving-image reconstruction of those images, and of his own childhood. He tells it like he saw it.' (g)

**Public engagement with Billingham's previous work**

The film has also brought public attention to Billingham's earlier family work. Approximately 20 vintage photographic pieces from *Ray's a Laugh* were included in the major group exhibition 'Black Mirror' at the Saatchi Gallery in London (September 2018 to February 2019). Billingham's earlier work was also included in 'Hooked', the inaugural exhibition of the Science Gallery, London (September to December 2018) (h), a relatively new gallery that aims to connect art, science and public health.

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

a. List of international festival participations (produced by Luxbox, July 2019). Festivals attended highlighted in green on list

b. List of international film awards [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6601502/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6601502/awards?ref_=tt_awd)

c. List of international film festival Q and A sessions

d. Selected media reviews and press coverage for Ray & Liz – dates and links

e. Social justice film awards:

*Lux*: <http://www.creativeeuropeuk.eu/news/ray-liz-competes-lux-prize>

*Subversive*: <https://subversivefestival.com/en/sf19/ray-liz-our-defeats-and-kg-win-wild-dreamer-awards-at-12-subversive-film-festival/>

*Signis*: <http://www.signis.net/news/culture/25-04-2019/a-family-portrait-from-the-uk-wins-the-signis-award-at-bafici-2019>

f. Crompton, Erica. "Ray of light." *The Lancet Psychiatry* 3.7 (2016): 618.  
[doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(16\)30127-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(16)30127-4)

g. *Guardian Reality bites: does Ray & Liz avoid the poverty porn trap?* (4/3/2019)  
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/mar/04/richard-billingham-does-ray-and-liz-avoid-the-poverty-porn-trap>

h. *Hooked*, Science Gallery, London <https://london.sciencegallery.com/hooked>